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Friday, July 23, 2004

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Consortium rallies suburbs

Goal is to unite communities to ensure survival

By Cindi Andrews
Enquirer staff writer

A leader of the effort to revitalize Cleveland's aging suburbs exhorted Hamilton County's communities Thursday to unite for their financial survival.

"We must work together or perish," said Ken Montlack, chairman of the First Suburbs Consortium of Northeast Ohio.

Montlack is also vice mayor of Cleveland Heights, one of the small, older cities that ring Cleveland. These Cuyahoga County communities - known as first suburbs or inner-ring suburbs - were the first in the United States to form a political alliance to attract and retain residents, businesses and government money.

These older suburbs typically have no room to grow, their borders filled with houses more than half a century old, abandoned but contaminated industrial sites and low-end shopping centers.

They also tend to be forgotten in fights for state and federal money, which center on growing outer suburbs such as Warren County versus inner-city neighborhoods such as Over-the-Rhine.

In Cuyahoga, the First Suburbs Consortium has created a development council that markets available commercial and industrial sites. It has experimented with converting old duplexes into condos.

The consortium has given the 15-member communities the political might to assert that if downtown Cleveland gets a

FIRST SUBURBS

Hamilton County planners have developed these criteria to define "first suburb: "

- More than 2,500 residents per square mile.
- Less than 1.5 percent increase in households between 1990 and 2000.
- At least 60 percent of houses built before 1960.
- Houses predominantly smaller than 1,300 square feet

For more information about Ohio's First Suburbs Consortiums, visit www.firstsuburbs.org/

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convention center - as business leaders want - the suburbs should benefit, too.

The Columbus and Cincinnati suburbs each have a First Suburbs Consortium, too, but the Cincinnati group has struggled for several years.

"We've been waiting a long time for Cincinnati," Montlack told a group of 35 local leaders who attended Thursday's meeting of the First Suburbs Consortium of Southwest Ohio. "If you can organize from one end of Interstate 71 to the other, I know we can have an impact."

At least a dozen communities in Hamilton County say that they're in.

"I think it'll provide us with a voice we don't currently have," Silverton City Manager Mark Wendling said. "There's strength in numbers."

Dave O'Leary, a longtime Deer Park official, said suburban leaders are taking the First Suburbs effort seriously because the state may reduce its traditional funding for local governments.

"Our budget can't take another hit," said Deer Park's safety-service director.

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